AP Photo

Benjamin Hooks speaks in Memphis yesterday

Mock Trial Jury Clears Ray

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Memphis, Tenn. — James Earl Ray was acquitted of slaying the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. during a mock trial in a cable TV special last night.

The three-hour program, "Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray," was broadcast on HBO on the 25th anniversary of King's slaying. The verdict has no legal weight.

Ray, serving 99 years for shooting the civil rights leader in 1968 while King stood on a motel balcony, testified in the mock trial by satellite from Riverbend State Prison in Nashville.

In 1969 Ray pleaded guilty to the slaying but later tried to recant his plea.

The 10-day, unscripted mock trial was filmed in Memphis in January with a real judge, real lawyers, real witnesses and an out-of-state jury.

The broadcast was produced by Thames Television of London. Both defense and prosecution participated in editing 56 hours of testimony into the three hours.

The program will be aired four more times this month.

Ray repeated his claim that a mysterious gunrunner named "Raoul" manipulated him and set him up to take the blame. He said his guilty plea was coerced.

In 1978, a U.S. House special committee concluded Ray shot King, but that he may have had help and that the investigation should have looked more closely at Ray's brothers.